

How to Make the Most of Office Hours

What do you think is the best academic resource at your college?

- A. Your textbook
- B. Your fellow students
- C. Your professor's office hour
- D. The library
- E. The Internet

If you chose (C.), you're correct. Many students fail to realize this fact: they think college is simply about attending classes, finishing homework, writing papers and taking exams. While these are crucial components of your education, office hours can help you succeed in all of these activities. Moreover, you can use your time in office hours to maximize your GPA. After all, it's your college professor who's teaching the material, creating exams and assigning the course grades. Why not go directly to her for assistance?

All full-time professors have office hours set aside each week. These office hours serve one purpose: to help students. During office hours, your professor, who is an expert in the discipline covered in your course, is ready to assist you in understanding the lectures, preparing for quizzes and exams, and reviewing drafts of essays and projects. If you've never been to office hours, you might not know what to do once you get there. Here are some tips on how to get the most out of office hours with your college professor.

Most important: Go

Successful students link up with their professors early in the quarter (usually during the first week). These students return for assistance and feedback throughout the term. If you want to be successful, please start visiting your professors in office hours as soon as possible.

You may feel anxious about, fearful of, or intimidated by talking with your professor outside of class. Or you may feel like you are bothering your professor. These are natural feelings for young students not familiar with office hours. Be reassured: almost all professors want to speak with you and get to know you in person. The purpose of office hours is to help you. Professors want to talk with you about your progress, to help clarify your understanding, and to guide you to success. But if you don't show up, your professor can't do these things for you. Please make the decision to visit each of your professors during office hours at least once each quarter.

Make your first visit early in the term

It's best to visit office hours at least a week before a scheduled exam or a paper due date. You'll also beat the hordes of cramers lined up at your professors door on days before the big events. Also, consider visiting office hours at least once during the first week of the quarter. This is before most other students think they need help and you will likely get your professor's full attention. You will also start to build rapport with your professor and learn how office hours work early in the quarter. This can be helpful in getting a strong start.

Check office location and office hours

Confused about where your professor is or when she has office hours? First, check your class syllabus; Professors usually list their office number and office hours on the first page of the syllabus. Don't know how to read the office number because you are unfamiliar with that building on campus? Ask your professor where her office is before, during or after class. Or use Google to find a map of your college that tells you the location of each building.

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When possible, make an appointment

Some professors want you to drop by during office hours whenever you wish; others might prefer an appointment in advance. While dropping by to see if your professor is available is often fine, it's a good idea to let her know in advance that you would like to stop by.

In order to make an appointment to attend office hours, speak with your professor before or after class to agree on a time that works well. Another option is to send a brief, courteous, professional e-mail to request an appointment. The class syllabus will typically include the professor's e-mail address, or you may find it on her website. In either case, be sure to let your professor know what you want to work on.

Can't make regular scheduled times?

Can't make your professor's office hours because of a schedule conflict? Do your best to rearrange your schedule to attend regular office hours. Your professor serves many students (sometimes hundreds of students). It may be difficult to make individual appointments for every student that has a time conflict. Be respectful of this constraint. Do your best to attend your professors' stated office hours. For example, you might change your work hours, take a different bus home or adjust childcare to fit in a visit.

If you have another class at the same time as office hours or it is impossible to change your schedule, contact your professor and see if there are other times in her schedule that you could meet. Professors are usually happy to see you at other times if they can arrange it. But you need to give your professor notice in advance so she can plan accordingly.

Get Organized

Most professors are NOT impressed by a backpack stuffed with papers. While your professor is eager to help you, she will not appreciate that you took 10 minutes to find a copy of an assignment or an essay. Worse, if you show up to talk about a quiz or essay and forget to bring that graded assignment with you, you will likely be wasting everyone's time.

Avoid these issues by being organized: have a special folder for your office hour appointments and bring it with you to every appointment. Create a binder for your class work, quizzes, exams, projects and papers. This way you can easily find your work. Similarly, if you have a question about a subject in the textbook, make sure to bring the textbook with you. Use a Post-It note on the page(s) you would like to discuss. You will impress your professor and you will get the most out of your time in office hours.

Make a List

More often than not, the best questions to ask during office hours come up while you're in class or studying. Don't assume that you'll remember them later! Keep a separate page of notes for concepts that require clarification, as well as subjects that you'd like to discuss further. Title this page "Questions for Office Hours" and keep this in your office-hours folder. For each question on this list, use a check box as a bullet point. This way, as soon as you get answers to this question, you can check it off and move onto the next item on your list.

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Come Prepared

Your college professor comes to class with a lesson prepared. However, during office hours you are the one who has to be ready. Keep in mind that professors use their downtime in office hours to grade papers, do research, or answer emails. If you come to their office without any questions to ask, you'll be wasting their time.

In order to prepare for your office hour visit, write a second draft of your lesson notes from in class meetings. Fill in all the details that you missed during class and make sure you understand every step presented. Also, genuinely attempt to work as many homework problems as you can.

If you are struggling with a homework problem or a problem solved during lecture, try to ask specific questions. Rather than just saying "How do I do problem number three?" it is more useful to say "I tried problem number three. Here is my work. I notice we have seen this type of problem before during lecture. However, when I try to do XXX, I find that it doesn't work. I also tried doing YYY, but that didn't work either. What else can I try?"

Be Specific

Be as specific as possible with your questions. Because you will often generate your questions a few days before your office hours visit, make sure to include as many details as possible in your questions. That way, you won't forget anything when it comes time to talk to your college professor.

Similarly, the more succinct and direct your questions are, the better. Don't expect to go to office hours and ask your professor "Could you go over your lectures from last week." Nor should you expect to have your professor read an entire paper draft. Instead, it is much better to come in with a few targeted questions about a specific point, idea, or problem that you didn't get. Keep in mind that in a 15-minute meeting with your professor, you'll be able to discuss only two or three questions. Come prepared with your best shots.

Go Every Week

This isn't always possible, especially since most professors only have office hours once or twice each week. However, the more often you go to office hours, the better you'll understand the material. After visiting professors once, many students find that they feel more confident about their work and better able to succeed. Successful students also use office hours to apply for transfer to university or professional degree programs. The more often you visit office hours, the better relationship you can build with your college professor. This can lead to better grades and better recommendations.

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Make a Good Impression

Keep in mind that your college professor isn't just someone who assigns you homework and gives you grades. Professors can be fantastic lifelong contacts. You never know when you might need their help. At office hours, be polite and friendly. Show that you're interested in the material. You'll be glad you did when it is time to request an academic letter of recommendation.

Also, treat your professor as a mentor: seek advice during critical points in your academic and professional career. You might ask questions about influential books to read, course selection, professional development, internships or residencies, etc. By consistently asking your professors for milestone advice, you will get a steady source of inspiration and support from people who succeeded in what you are doing.

Avoid overly casual, social or flirty behavior. Keep your relationship with your professor professional and focus on the course content. Also avoid discussing your feelings or opinions about other students or professors. Keep your thoughts about others to yourself (unless specifically asked).

Examples of Good Questions

Here is a list of a few time-tested questions you might ask during office-hour visits:

- I set high standards for my educational experience and I work hard to achieve my goals. In your class, I have set a goal to earn an [enter desired grade]. I have carefully read the course syllabus and noticed that my grade will be calculated as follows: [describe how you understand the course grade]. With this in mind, I wanted to ask for your guidance. If you were taking this class, what would you do to successfully achieve a [desired grade] in this class? How would you spend your time on a day-to-day basis? What strategies would you use to make sure you were learning as much as possible in this class AND achieving your desired grade?
- I am always open to learning better ways to study and succeed in college. I am having a hard time figuring out how best to reflect on in-class lectures. Do you have any suggestions on what I can do to better understand our in-class lectures and how I might use the lecture content more effectively when I am working on homework problems?
- I notice we have an exam next week on [enter day of week]. I have started to prepare for this exam by doing all of the following [list what you have done to prepare]. However, before I get too far into my preparation, I'd like to get your guidance: What would you do to prepare for our upcoming exam? How would you spend your time in the coming days before the exam to make sure you were ready?
- Thank you for returning our exam last week. In order to better understand how I did on this exam, I have re-done all the problems that I missed and written as much of the correct solutions as I can. However, I need help with a few details on problem(s) [enter problems that you cannot yet solve]. Here is my work so far. I have tried XXX and YYY but I am stuck. Do you have any suggestions?
- After finishing my exam corrections, I am ready to discuss my exam performance with you. In order to prepare for this exam, I [describe how you prepared for the exam]. I am proud of the problems I got correct, I understand the mistakes I made and I would like to improve my performance for next time. What might I do differently to prepare for and succeed on our next in-class exam?